

Movie Palaces

Gilded relics of Hollywood's heyday

still glitter on in their twilight years



The silver screen never shone more brightly than in the grandiose movie palaces that sprang up on Main Street, U.S.A. between the end of World War I and the Depression. Razzle-dazzle marquees lured the movie-mad public into lush settings that made every two-bit patron feel like a sultan. Lobbies gleamed with marble and gold, fountains plashed, clouds drifted and stars twinkled. There were circus-style playrooms, infirmaries and Versailles-like lounges to accommodate the vast

audiences of all ages. But time and TV have taken their toll of these resplendent theaters. Many have been demolished to make way for parking lots or high-rise buildings. Some have been successfully converted to symphony halls or other uses. But a hardy few—including the Atlanta Fox (above), a 5,000-seat theater built in 1929 to resemble a Moorish courtyard under an azure sky—have managed to survive and sustain the glamour of the days when moviegoing was high adventure.

Majestic moods and interludes surge from the mighty Wurlitzer

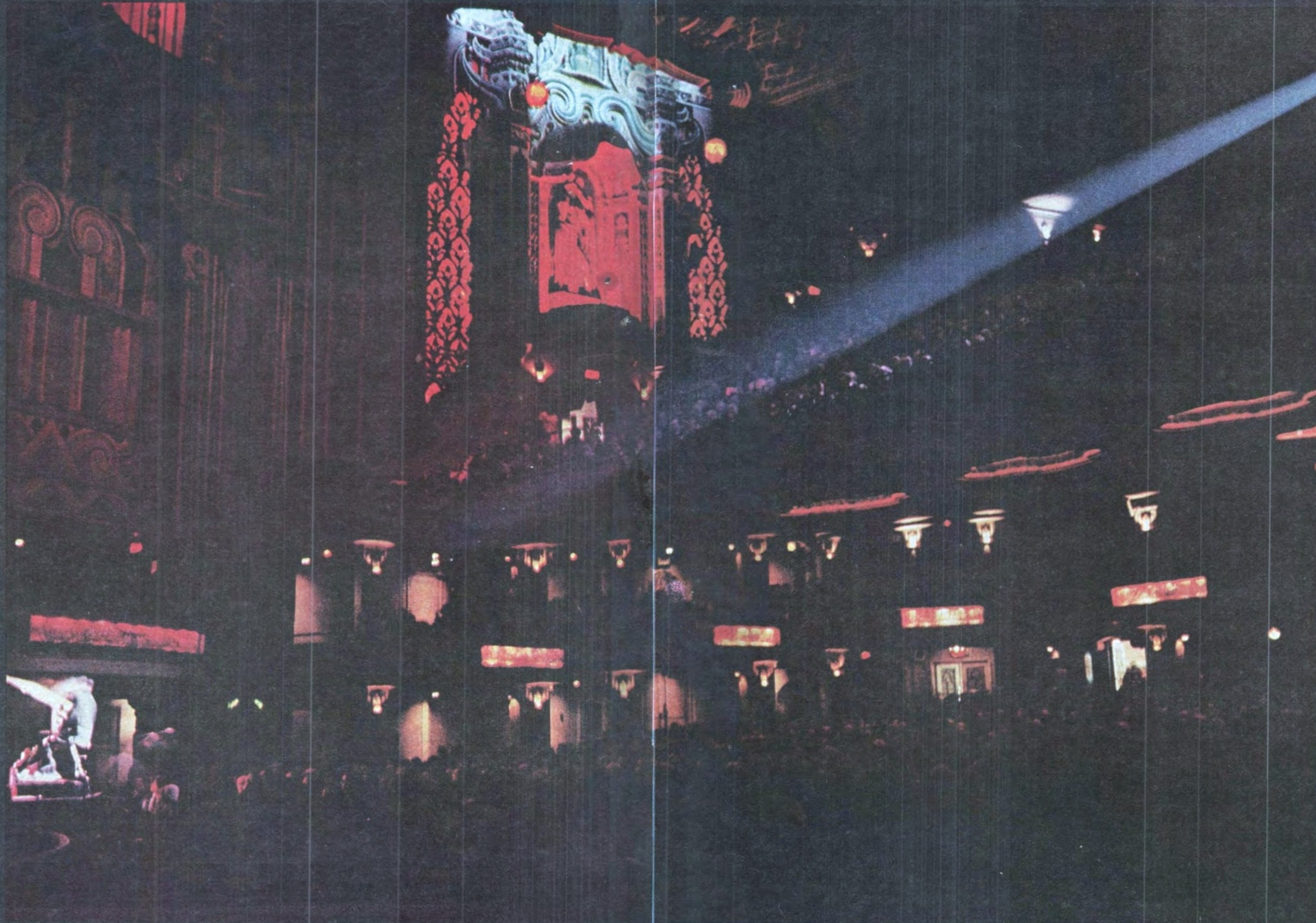


A gilded goddess (above) in Hollywood's militant-modernistic Pantages Theatre looms like a stage mother over a fledgling De Mille and his golden camera.



Oldtime organist Hal Pearl (above) leads a singalong in Chicago's Oriental Theatre, whose long-silent Wurlitzer organ has been restored to mightiness by the American Theatre Organ Society. Such

restorations have triggered a wide-scale revival of silent films like *The Phantom of the Opera* (left), in which the great Lon Chaney plays on screen while the organ in the theater provides a melodramatic accompaniment.



A medievalized flutist (above) tootles away in the roseate glow of a corridor niche in the Warner Theatre in Erie, Pa. Built in 1931, the Warner has been maintained in prime condition.

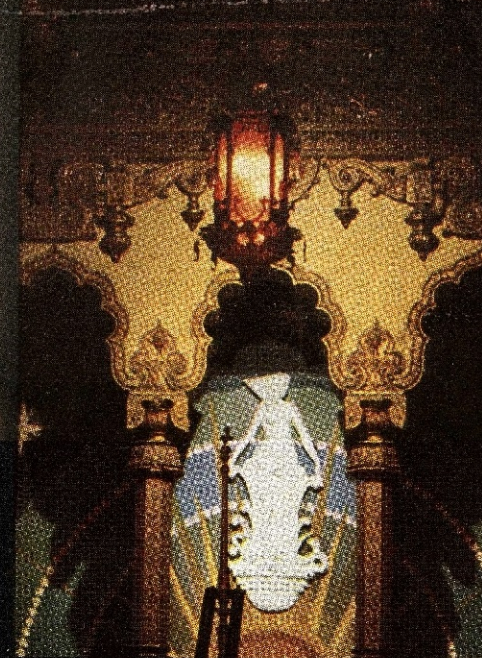
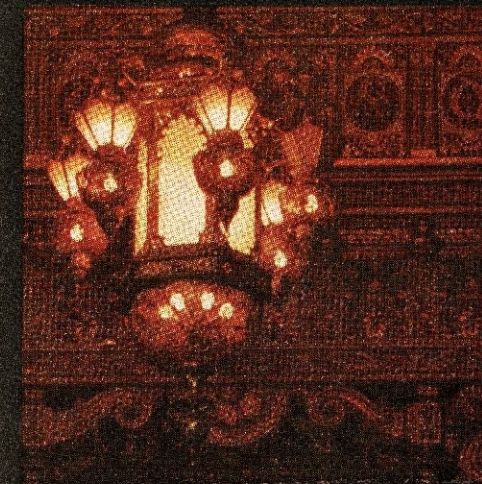
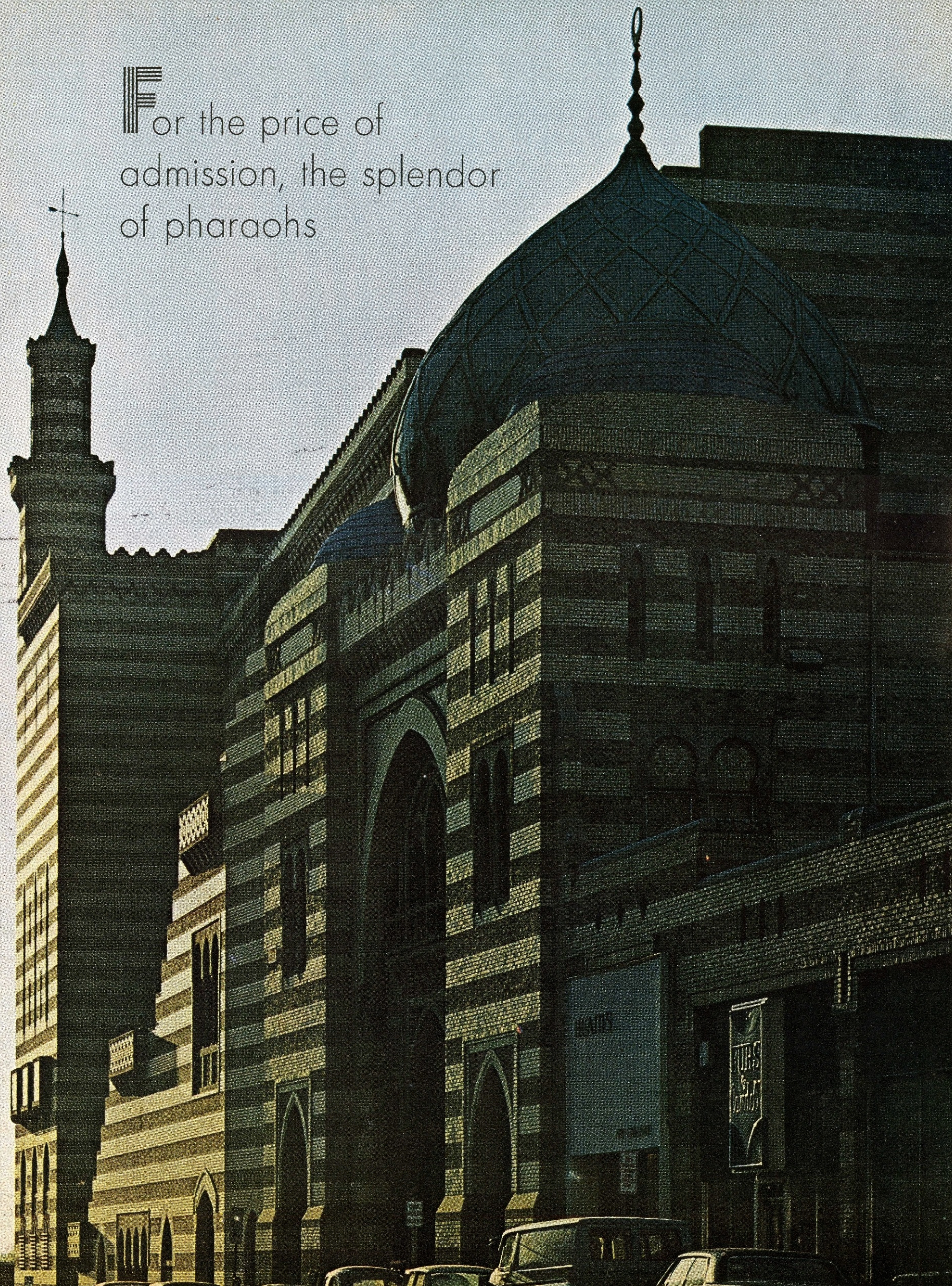


The sumptuous decor (right) of Loew's Paradise in the Bronx, N.Y. is a free-wheeling merger of a Renaissance facade, ancient Roman statues and the Winged Lion of St. Mark. Such painted plaster extrav-

aganzas were the stock-in-trade of Michelangelo Studios whose proprietor, John Eberson, was the ingenious architect of the Paradise and other eye-popping theaters, which he modestly labeled "Pretty Playhouses."

For the price of admission, the splendor of pharaohs

Photographed by BEN HALL and HENRY GROSKINSKY

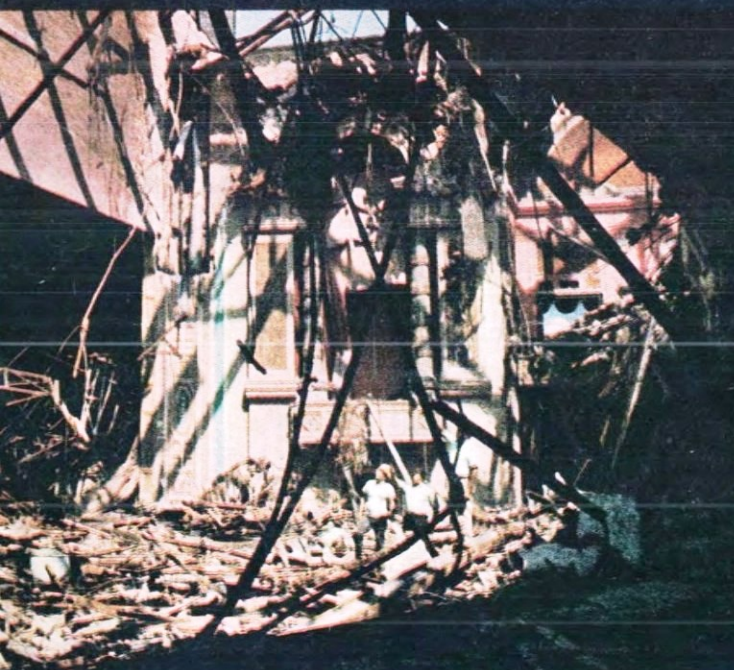


An orgy of Orientalia erupted in the '20s. For audiences in the mood to swoon over Rudolph Valentino as "The Sheik" or Theda Bara as "Cleopatra" (right), what better place could be found than a theater like Atlanta's Fox, whose dome, minaret and fancy brickwork (left) still bring a bit of Baghdad to Peachtree Street. Purists might have winced at the frequent mélange of styles: at Loew's 175th Street in New York, the Alhambra-like lobby (above) is graced by a plaster maiden in the "Moderne" mode. But

plausible Oriental touches predominated. A bird of brilliant plumage (top, center) has been glass-eyeing patrons of Akron's Loew's (now the Civic Theatre) since it opened 42 years ago. Turbaned sentinels with scimitars at the ready guard the grand staircase of the Detroit Fox (above). And Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles, built the very year (1922) that King Tut's tomb was discovered, was given a splendor of scarabs and sunbursts (above and below Theda Bara) that would have titillated Tut himself.



And in the
end, trampolines,
Evangelists or a
wrecker's ball



HARRY BENSC

Many a movie palace, like Loew's Sheridan in New York (above), has been blasted to dust in the name of progress. Fate has found new uses for others. Loew's 175th Street has become the headquarters of the Evangelist, Reverend Ike, who holds weekly services in the Hispanic auditorium (right, top). Brooklyn's Paramount is now an ornate gym of Long Island University (right, bottom). The Bronx Paradise is being eyed by real estate developers, but so far it is still in business, its lobby ceiling (opposite) sweetly evoking the Golden Age of filmdom as *Kinema*, goddess of movies, carries an unreeling film up to heaven.



This color spread was the inspiration of Ben Hall, author of "The Best Remaining Seats" and a native Atlantan.

The Henry Groskinsky photo of the Fox auditorium was taken Easter, 1968 and produced by Ben.

Ben Hall passed away in late 1970, and the Life movie palace spread he had dreamed of was published posthumously.

Ben had previously produced the iconic 1960 Life photo of Gloria Swanson standing in the ruins of the New York Roxy, below left. Below right, Ben Hall at the Fox Moller console, 1969.



Swan Song for a Famous Theater

